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Publicity, Communication and Community in the Information Age



ABSTRACT

In the age of electronic communication, a new virtual social space is in the making which strengthen the cohesion of competing virtual communication communities, and in which, therefore, the influence of traditional social and political institutes declines. The new communication situations created by the use of electronic technologies (radio, television, the internet, mobile telephony) transform our notion and expectations of political communication, and have a tremendous impact on the social and political rituals. This article argues that the new multi-channel communication situations created by the use of new media have a significant impact on politicians who address so many different types of people simultaneously. The aim of my essay is to show how the networked spaces of multi-channel electronic communication, the multiple public spheres and the new, information-centered redefinition of social and political categories transform the style and content of political communication and, thus, our expectations concerning the political performances.

KEYWORDS

information age, electronic communication, publicity, community

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INTRODUCTION

Electronic communication creates new situations which transform our notions of the norms of social and political behavior. A new, virtual social and political space is in the making which has a tremendous impact on the social and political rituals. The old hegemony of state-structured and territorially bound mediated public life is being replaced by networked spaces of communication not tied to territory, and not resembling a single public sphere within nation-state framework. Thus in the new social space there is a fundamentally new possibility to change the rules of social perception and the conceptualization of relation between our community and traditional political institutes of state.

This paper argues that the new multi-channel communication situations created by the use of electronic technologies (radio, television, the internet, mobile telephony) have a significant impact on politicians who address so many different types of people simultaneously. The aim of my essay is to show how the networked spaces of multi-channel electronic communication transform the style and content of political communication and, thus, our expectations and interpretation strategies concerning political communication and performances.

MULTIPLE PUBLIC SPHERES IN THE SPACE OF NEW MEDIA

The new communication situations created by electronic media have a significant impact on politicians' communication role for two reasons: (a) by using new technologies, the political communication role has become more complex, and (b) the expansion of electronic communication has transformed our expectations concerning politicians' communication role.

With the expansion of the multi-channel communication, our notion of public spheres has become more complex. The use of the new communication technologies has led to new kinds of public forums. And thanks to the appearance of these new kinds of forums, both the structure and our conceptualization of public sphere are transformed. The multi-channel mass communication offers not only new technological conditions for communication between isolated social situations, but a communication practice which transforms the social situation itself. As Joshua Meyrowitz writes on the relationship among electronic media and new social situations: *"Electronic media have combined previously distinct social settings, moved the dividing line between private and public towards the private, and weakened the relationship between social situations and physical places. The logic underlying situational patterns of behaviour in a print-oriented society, therefore, has been radically subverted"* (MEYROWITZ 1986. 308.).

In a print-oriented society, the framework of the traditional public sphere has usually conceded with the boundaries of nation-state. In the age of electronic media, the old hegemony of state-structured and territorially bound public life mediated by radio, television, and newspapers is being rapidly eroded. With the expansion of multi-channel mass media, a new complex mosaic of differently sized, overlapping and interconnected public spheres is developing.

One of the most interesting arguments linking new media with multiple public spheres has been articulated by John Keane whose central concern is the decline of public service broadcasting, arguing that the traditional hegemony of state-structured and territorially bound mediated public life is being replaced by networked spaces of communication not tied to territory, and not resembling a single public sphere within a nation-state framework (KEANE 1995).

Keane distinguishes among *“macro-public spheres”*, hundreds of millions of people enmeshed in disputes at the global level; *“meso-public spheres”*, millions of people interacting at the nation-state level; and *“micro-public spheres”*, with dozens, hundreds or thousands of disputants interacting at the sub-nation-state level. These are not discrete spaces overlapping networks defined by the lack of differentiation among spheres. In Keane’s view, social movements comprise low-profile networks of small groups, organizations, initiatives, local contracts and friendships submerged in everyday life. These networks use various means of alternative media and communication, including telephones, videos, and computers, to question and transform the dominant codes.

These public forums operating through various kinds of communications technologies, of course, are related to each other, exercise mutual influence and form each other. Thus they make more complex the politician’s role who wants to take a stand on public affairs. Moreover, the expansion of electronic media leads to the appearance of a new communication language which integrates the forms of language used in oral utterances and in written texts, and which also affect the style of the political communication formed by complex system of multiple public spheres.

Politicians aim at forming and sending their political messages efficiently in the new networked spaces of communication. This new complex communication situation, on the one hand, requires more complex communication strategy of politicians, and, on the other hand, leads to the simplification of the content of the messages and the instrumentalization of the themes and values concerned by political performances. As Meyrowitz writes concerning the new political style created by electronic media: *“»Truth, not artifice« and »issues, not images«, are themselves important chants and central themes in the political drama”* (MEYROWITZ 1986. 277).

In the changing practice of political communication, values and moral dilemmas become increasingly instruments of the convincing communication rather than real foundations of moral decisions. This is why though the political communication concerning programs and strategies is usually *“value-centered”*, politicians hardly ever speak about their decision dilemmas and the moral dimensions of these dilemmas.

A specific competition is in the making in the space of multi-channel mass communication in which the political rivals’ aim is to overbid each other concerning the values referred by them in a political drama mediated by new media.

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND TABLOIDIZATION OF MASS MEDIA

The above mentioned process is accelerated by tabloidization of mass media. Tabloidization involves a shift by the media away from national and international issues of importance to a more entertainment or gossip style of journalism. It is a shift to new and more entertainment-oriented kinds of content, and a shift from verbal to visual priorities. The effect of this shift to a new journalism style is that the important issues such as socio-political reforms which require to be addressed with seriousness have been given the back seat.

In the process of tabloidization of mass media, marketing has become a large part of both electronic and print media. In other words, this process can be regarded as a shift from journalism to the market.

The result of this process, for example, is a news media which manipulates information to push the agenda of the corporations that is based on marketing themselves and their products. This is where tabloidization comes into play. In order to push their interests, the corporations have created a news media that concentrate on attracting audiences through stories about scandal, lifestyle, sleaze and personal lives.

Since media is an integral and imperative component of democratic polity and the prospects of mass media are today viewed as more powerful than ever before, this process of tabloidization has a great impact on the style of political performances. One of the most important consequences of the expansion of tabloid media is that new communication technologies have been eroding barriers between the politicians' private and public spheres, in other words, traditional back and front regions. A new politician role is in the making which is referred to as "middle region" role by Meyrowitz in his work, *No Sense of Place*. As Meyrowitz writes: *"The reconfiguration of the stage of politics demands a drive toward consistency in all exposed spheres. To be carried off smoothly, the new political performance requires a new »middle region« role: behavior that lacks the extreme formality of former front region behavior and also lacks the extreme informality of traditional back region behavior. Wise politicians make the most of the new situation. They try to expose selected, positive aspects of their back regions in order to ingratiate themselves with the public. Yet there is a difference between coping with the new situation and truly controlling it. Regardless of how well individual politicians adjust to the new exposure, the overall image of leaders changes in the process. The new political performance remains a performance, but its style is markedly changed"* (MEYROWITZ 1986. 271.).

As a consequence of this process, it is increasingly difficult for politicians to distinguish between the ways in which they behave in private situations and ways in which they present themselves for the mass media. *"The new public image of politicians"*, writes Meyrowitz, *"has many of the characteristics of the former back-stage of political life, and many once informal interactions among politicians and their families, staff, reporters, and constituents have become more stiff and formal as they are exposed to national audiences"* (MEYROWITZ 1986. 274).

Consequently, tabloidization of mass media affects not only the perceptions of audiences but also the response of politicians to their own roles and performances. To use the multi-channel public forums in their performances effectively, politicians adopt the language and formal means of tabloid mass media willy-nilly. They adapt to the tabloidization tendencies as active participants of the mass media processes, and by adopting style of tabloid media, they contribute to the tabloidization of political communication itself too.

The political practice is determined increasingly by the messages simplified extremely. And this tendency leads, as we have seen above, to the instrumentalization of such communication themes as ethical values and moral dilemmas. The complex network of the forums created by multi-channel mass communication and stylistic consequences of tabloidization of mass media can be regarded as bases of a political communication practice that is less and less suitable to present the real values and intentions motivating politicians' acts.

In addition, a politician must face up to the fact that the expansion of the multi-channel mass communication leads to a new conceptualization of community. With this new conceptualization, community is conceived as a virtual network of interactions among individuals who uniformly accept and apply some rules for the communicative acts aiming at the effective exchange of information. In the following, I would like to consider this information-centered conceptualization of social and political interactions among networked individuals.

TOWARDS AN INFORMATION-CENTERED REDEFINITION OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CATEGORIES

By using the electronic communication technologies, the media-networked individuals become members of a virtual community that is determined both by the global and the local conditions for an effective method of information exchange. In this new virtual community, new localities are in the making which are particular in many ways, and get are also influenced by global processes and global consciousness. Thus the new local communities organized in the space of electronic communication, on the one hand, strengthen the local attachments, the local identity and, on the other hand, can be regarded as integrated elements of the virtual communities created by global information exchange. Consequently, the global virtual community serves as a kind of comparison background for the local communities organized in the age of electronic media.

With globalized communication space, electronic media give the networked individual external perspectives from which to judge and define his own local community. In other words, the twentieth-century expansion of electronic communication technologies, as Meyrowitz writes, "*have placed an interconnected global matrix over local experience*" (MEYROWITZ 2005. 28).

The networked individual determines the characteristics of his own local community in the light of information acquired in the global communication space. The global perspective created by electronic communication has transformed not only the community-definitions but the individual relation to social rules. In the space of electronic communication there is a new possibility to change the rules of social perception and the national institutions of political and cultural domination as a consequence of new global perspectives.

One of the most characteristic features of the virtual space of electronic communication is that it lacks the compulsory categorization system and the classificatory forms and norms of a print society. In the media-networked global and local communities it is difficult to maintain several traditional categorical distinctions that characterized the print societies. That is, as electronic communication technologies expand, the dividing line between several political and social categories becomes increasingly indistinct.

The age of electronic communication is the age of opening categorical and classification boundaries. In this new space of communication the traditional distinctions between private and public, between children and adult experiences, and between male and female spheres collapse and traditional distinctions between private and public, between children and adult experiences, and between male and female spheres collapse and disappear. In the age of electronic media, as Meyrowitz suggests, we are experiencing “*both macro-level homogenization of identities and micro-level fragmentation of them*” (MEYROWITZ 2005. 29.). These permeable linguistic, cultural, and social boundaries affect both the particular behaviors and social identity in general. The increasing functional permeability of these boundaries is a result of such linguistic, cultural and social processes that contribute to develop the media-networked individuals’ complex identity.

This complex identity, however, is rooted, first of all, in the new forms of communities. In other words, the use of electronic media can make our concept of community more complex by creating new kinds of communities. A networked individual becomes a member both of a global community based on the global communication crossing cultural, national boundaries and a local community that is organized on the basis of specific, inner norms in the space of electronic communication.

As Joshua Meyrowitz writes on the “multiple, multi-layered, fluid, and endlessly adjustable senses” of the media-networked individuals’ identity: “*Rather than needing to choose between local, place-defined identities and more distant ones, we can have them all, not just in rapid sequence but in overlapping experiences. We can attend a local zoning board meeting, embodying the role of local concerned citizen, as we cruise the internet on a wireless-enabled laptop enacting other, non-local identities. And we can merge the two as we draw on distant information to inform the local board of how other communities handle similar issues and regulations. All the while, we can remain accessible to friends, family, and colleagues from anywhere via a text-message enabled mobile phone*” (MEYROWITZ 2005. 28.).

A new virtual social space is in the making which strengthen the cohesion of competing local communities, and in which, therefore, the influence of traditional social and political institutes declines. The new communication situations created by the use of electronic technologies foster greater emotional attachments, to the local community which we choose from among the competing communities deliberately without social and political restriction.

Thus in this new social space there is a fundamentally new possibility to change the rules of social perception and the conceptualization of the relation between the local communities and traditional political institutes of state. Thanks to these changes, the networked individual is attached to the place and position appointed by his own social class less and less. Through his multi-channel communicative acts he can become acquainted with more and more communal forms, ways of life, traditions and values, in the light of which he can choose more deliberately from among the competing local communities. And this more deliberate choice becomes a part of the more and more complex and multi-layered identity of the networked individual.

Considering the influence of mediated communication on our conceptualization of community, many theorists believe that we need a synthesis of physical and virtual communities in order to truly inhabit our experiences. For example, Manuel CASTELLS (2000) holds that we need a “bridge” between physical and virtual places in order to unify our experience, because virtual

communities only deal in fragmented individuals as opposed to real life. Others, like Amitai ETZIONI (2001) and James E. KATZ et al. (2004), emphasize that the best communities are indeed the hybrids of physical and virtual communities which have a higher level of social capital.¹ They see ideal communities as virtual communities enhancing physical ones. If the mediated communication actually does increase social capital of communities, then it will be accompanied by a rise in offline contact, civic engagement, and other traditional forms of social capital. It seems that users of new communication technologies are more likely to be involved in community organizations, to be political involved, and to communicate with friends and family, than non-users.

According to Katz et al., since electronically mediated communication becomes inherently part of real life in today's world, "we need an operational synthesis of virtual and physical communities in order to have fulfilling, embodied experiences all of the time" (KATZ et al. 2004: 362). In this view, in the age of electronically mediated communication, the dividing line between virtual and physical communities becomes increasingly indistinct. Therefore, as Mark Poster shows, mediated individuals imagine their virtual communities as real (POSTER 2001). That is, the role of communication as meaningful and value-based in virtual communities, works to construct physical communities as well.

In this view, these hybrid communities can be regarded as moral entities that allow individuals to transcend themselves and find partnership with humanity, and that, therefore, have some level of social capital. Thus well-developed social capital of community is linked to a strong internal morality in which individuals balance their individual rights with collective responsibility. Collective responsibility appears to be closely bound to an acceptance of moral norms and values. According to Amitai ETZIONI (1996), moral order then rests on core values that are shared by community and embedded in its social structures. As Etzioni suggests, communities often have strong "moral voices" that help to maintain social order in which values are accepted voluntarily rather than being forced to do so. Such a "moral voice", therefore, should encourage individuals and communities to reflect on their shared moral values and to avoid behaviour that contributes to unsustainable development.

Accordingly, electronic communication creates a new context in which our notions of morality, community, society, and human interactions become more complex. These more complex notions can be regarded as the bases of the idea of global and local information communities, in which an individual's communication attitudes are determined by their impression of their "self" as a permanently available individual whose communicative acts are embedded in a special network of communicative interactions. In earlier eras, communal ties were based on what DURKHEIM (1984) termed mechanical solidarity and were contingent on spatial proximity. In the new forms of communities, however, human relationships have become organic, since communal ties are based

¹ As a common set of expectations and values, social capital of community is based on the fact that trust among individuals will allow a community to accomplish more with their physical and mental capacities than individuals alone. That is, social capital of community can be regarded as an ability of people to associate and work together for common communal purposes. It is influenced by social interaction and communication, relations of trust, communal norms and values, and it describes the social networks of the individual along with the various webs of reciprocity. As Robert PUTNAM (2000. 19.) notes: "social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" and "calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal relations".

more on common values, ideas, and interests. It seems, therefore, that social capital is enhanced when new forms of communities develop around and extend traditional forms of communities.

The transformation of our notion of community, the complex network of the forums created by multi-channel mass communication and tabloidization of mass media are such developments that fundamentally change the stylistic elements of the political performances, the means and criteria of the convincing political communication, the social, communal expectations concerning politicians' communication role. And these developments, as we have seen, set politicians a big challenge who have to adapt to these changes, but who, at the same time, also have to stick to the human, moral values that can make the political communication authentic and, thus, convincing.

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